

Some information regarding  
Eighteenth Century Mezzotint  
Engravers and their work.

Published by  
M. Snodder & Co  
355 Fifth Ave., N.Y.



\$12.50



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Geo. Romney

Henry Meyer

Lady Hamilton  
as Nature

# MEZZOTINTO ENGRAVING

NEW YORK  
**M. Knoedler & Co.**  
FIFTH AVE. & 34TH ST.  
MCMVI

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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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This little pamphlet is intended for those who are interested in old Mezzotint Engravers and their works, but who have only a slight knowledge of them; it describes in a general way how the plates and prints are made, and gives such information as may prove useful to those who are making, or intending to make, a collection of prints in black and in color.

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It is conceded that Ludwig Von Siegen, who resided at Amsterdam in 1642, discovered and completed in the month of August of that year, a portrait of Amelia Elizabeth, Dowager Landgravine of Hesse, in mezzotint, this being the first engraving of the kind known. In 1654 this engraver met Prince Rupert at Brussels, and to him confided his secret.

History  
and  
General  
Informa-  
tion

History, Prince Rupert afterwards disclosed it to  
etc. Wallerant Vaillant and to Evelyn and  
(continued) Sherwin when he was in England. Theodore Caspara Fustenbergh was also another artist who obtained the knowledge, for there is a work by him dated the same year as the first one by Prince Rupert (1656). The art then passed from one to another, there being engravings by men who flourished during the latter half of the 17th century, among them John Thomas, called Thomas of Ypres (his earliest mezzotint is dated 1658); John Fredrich Leonard, 1669; John Van Somer, 1668; J. Vander Brugen, 1681. In 1668 Prince Rupert went to England, and nine years afterwards, in the hands of William Sherwin, the development of the new mezzotinto engraving began in the country where it was destined to rise to its highest state. Sherwin's first print is dated 1669. There were a number of engravers at this period who were successful in producing good work, the most noted being Place, Gascar, Blootelling, Valck, and J. Smith. At the opening of

the 18th century J. Smith was the foremost artist in mezzotinto engraving. When this style of art had become concentrated in England, artists flocked there from other countries; from France, J. Simon, who was considered the rival of Smith; the elder Faber, from Holland. A little later other engravers changed their style from line to mezzotinto, such as young Faber, G. White and Pelham; the last artist came to America and introduced his art here. In the closing years of the first half of the 18th century mezzotinto engraving declined very much in England, and did not revive until about 1753-54, when new blood was instilled into the practice of the art by the work of artists of the Irish school, such as MacArdell, who engraved the earliest plate from a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1746. Houston, Purcell, and subsequently Dixon, Fisher, J. Watson, T. Watson, J. R. Smith, Dickinson, Valentine Green, Dean, and Walker. Most of these engravers became masters of the art, and as the great portrait painters of the English

History,

etc.

(continued)

History, school lived and flourished at the same  
etc. time examples by the masters of this  
(continued) period—Reynolds, Hoppner, Romney,  
Gainsborough, Ramsay, Abbott, Beechey,  
Copley, Opie, and Stewart—were copied  
and engraved, often in the same year that  
they were painted. These engravings  
have not *naturally* deteriorated as time  
has passed on. This cannot be said of  
many of the originals, for ink and paper  
are more enduring than canvas and paint.  
It would seem as if the artist-engravers,  
stimulated by the extraordinary power of  
the painters of this period, had been en-  
abled to surpass in their art for the pur-  
pose of transcribing in all their entirety  
the pictures they imitated. To quote a  
remark made by Sir Joshua, after he had  
seen a fine engraving by MacArdell after  
one of his paintings: “By this man I shall  
be immortalised.” Other engravers at  
this period worthy of notice were P.  
Dawe, Dunkarton, Grozer, Hodges, Hud-  
son, Jones, Judkins, Laurie, Duponte, the  
nephew of Gainsborough; Haward and  
Spilsbury. There were less-known paint-

ers, such as Wright of Derby and Van Huysum, after whose pictures Earlom and Pether engraved some remarkably brilliant and effective prints. It seems but natural to believe that in possessing and studying works by these masters of mezzotinto engraving we are enabled more thoroughly to live in the time of the painters and understand their works more perfectly, and at the same time to nourish and improve our taste. Although no living engraver can compete in excellence with the great mezzotint engravers of the latter part of the eighteenth century, England possessed, till 1887, one who was almost as great as any of those; namely, Samuel Cousins. Born in 1801, his transcripts of Lawrence and Landseer's paintings are works of the highest art. The following is a partial list of the prominent and less noted engravers, not mentioned above, who flourished at the end of the 18th, and beginning of the 19th, century: Barney, J. Ward, W. Ward, Young, G. Dawe, H. Meyer, C. Turner, G. Clint, S. W. Reynolds, H.

History,  
etc.

(continued)

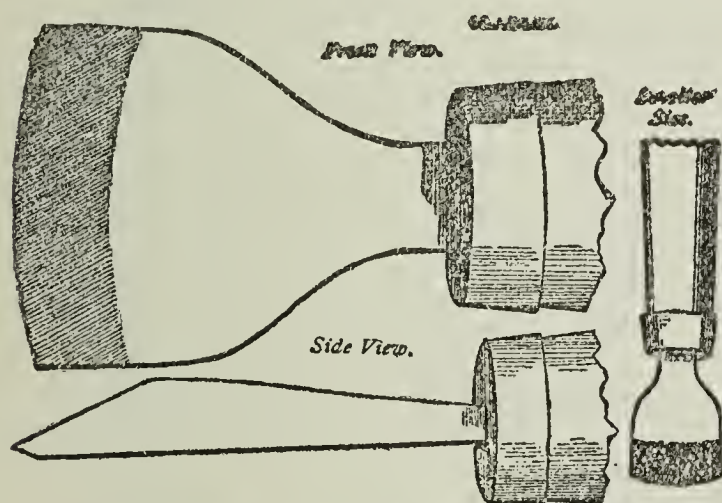
History, Dawe, W. Say, T. Lupton, and T. Hodg-  
etc. etts.  
(continued) *(For much of the above information we are  
indebted to the writings of John Chaloner  
Smith and Dr. Edward Hamilton.)*



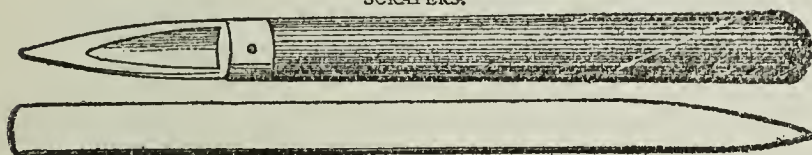
The instruments used in mezzotinto engraving consist of the cradle or rocking-tool, the scraper, the roulette and the burnisher.

The plates intended for engraving should be of the best copper.

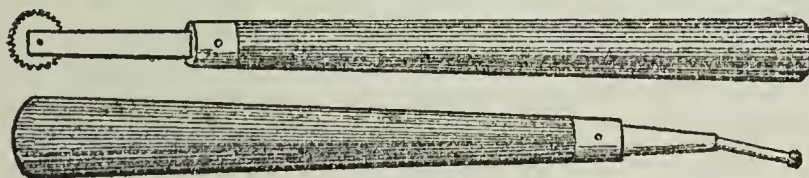
## Tools and Metal



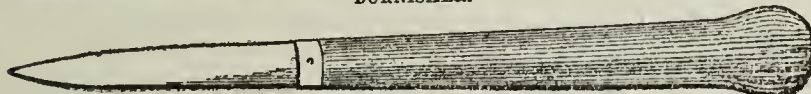
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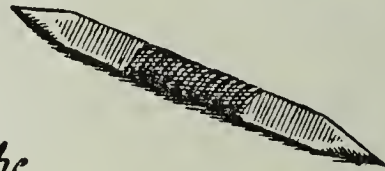
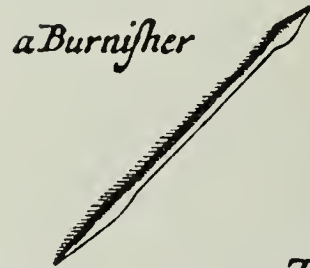
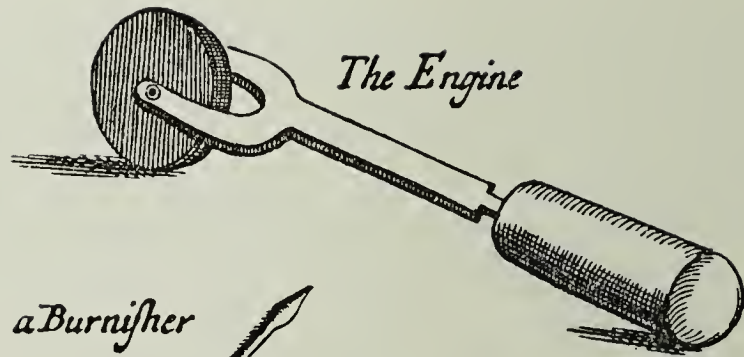


ROULETTES.



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Sir Joshua Reynolds

J. R. Smith

Lady Catherine Pelham Clinton



Mezzotinto is executed by covering the surface of the plate, using the cradle or rocking-tool, with lines sunk in it so close to each other, in many different directions, that, if printed, it would give a black impression ground from the whole. When this work is completed, the subject is traced, and the work is commenced by scraping and then burnishing the highest lights, after which the secondary tones are scraped away, and so on, proceeding gradually from light to dark, and leaving for the deepest shades the ground untouched.

## Mezzotinto Engraving

A mezzotint plate is the reverse of an etched plate, for in the former the blacks are removed, and the latter they are bitten in.

The prepared ink is rubbed into the plate, and then the surface is wiped off, leaving the ink only in the sunken parts. The plate paper is then placed upon the plate, and it is passed through a heavy copper-

## Printing in black

**Printing  
in  
Black  
(continued)** plate hand-press. This forces the paper into the engraved part of the plate, transferring the ink to it. In a mezzotinto plate, the shading is not a solid mass, as can be seen by examining a print with a magnifying glass. There will be found cross lines with the paper showing between. This gives a transparency of light and shade which could not be produced in any other way.

**Printing  
in  
Colors  
from  
One  
Plate** The process of printing in colors is the same as printing in black, only different colored inks are rubbed into the plate in their proper places, blending where necessary, the cleaning and printing being the same as described above. This, one can see, requires an immense amount of artistic knowledge, care and labor, the plate requiring fresh coloring for each impression. The first record of printing in color is in 1720. The artist's name was Jacob Le Blond. His print was taken from a mezzotint plate. Since then there

was a gradual improvement until color printing arose to its highest perfection in the latter part of the 18th century. Owing to the great amount of care and labor required, the art was not practised to any extent in its most perfect form after the first part of the 19th century.

Printing  
in  
Colors  
from  
One  
Plate  
(continued)

The proofs of engravings when approaching completion cannot properly be called states, they are what are called "Engraver's Proofs." When the plate is finished to the satisfaction of both artists, the first impression struck off the plate is an Artist's Proof. Each Engraver's Proof is naturally unique. The usual custom was to publish a number of impressions with etched letters, or before letters. These impressions were called the first published state, then followed the second and third states. But in regard to these states, as a matter of fact, there is no well-defined rule to be applied. It is impossible within

States

**States** the limits of a few paragraphs to convey  
(continued) any exact knowledge on so diffuse a subject.

**Undesirable Prints** A popular plate was often much abused. After leaving the hands of the original publisher (who had taken off what he considered as many impressions as the plate would bear), it would come into the possession of some printseller or publisher less scrupulous, would be retouched, and perhaps renamed, or the lettering all taken off, and false proofs issued. This was often done by placing a piece of thick paper over the letters during the printing, as well as by erasing the names from the copper. These deceptions have even been tried in present times, not only on the plates, but on the impressions themselves.

**Why the Old Are the Best** One may ask, why the old mezzotints are so much sought after and why they command such high prices? The answer is: Because they are the finest and best prod-



ucts of a most beautiful art; that they have improved with time; that they were made at a period when there was less of the commercial spirit prevalent and more of the artistic; that few perfect impressions were printed, and that, owing to the carelessness of many of the older collectors, few were preserved without blemish. It is the perfect print which is nowadays desired and competed for. Therefore, in selecting, care should be taken to choose those which are free from blemish and which are brilliant and clear in printing. It was not considered possible to print more than one hundred perfect impressions from one plate. Of some beautiful plates engraved for private individuals and circulation the impressions numbered less than fifty.

Why the  
Old Are  
the Best  
(continued)

As there are a number of methods for *grounding* a plate, which in their results resemble mezzotint we give herewith descriptions of those well known and often seen:

**Etching** A copper plate is prepared and burnished, the same as a mezzotint plate; the surface of it is covered with a varnish which is not affected by acid. With a pointed instrument called an etching needle, this varnish is cut through, and wherever the copper is uncovered the acid bites. The longer the acid remains upon the plate the deeper the lines will be. Thus one can understand how the lights and darks are made which go to make a picture.

**Photo-  
gravure** A photogravure, as the word suggests, is an engraving produced by the aid of photography. The processes of all photo-engraving primarily depends upon the fact that when soluble gelatine is mixed with bichromate of potash and exposed to the light it becomes insoluble.

To produce a photogravure then a thin film of bichromatized gelatine is exposed to



Etching  
Tools

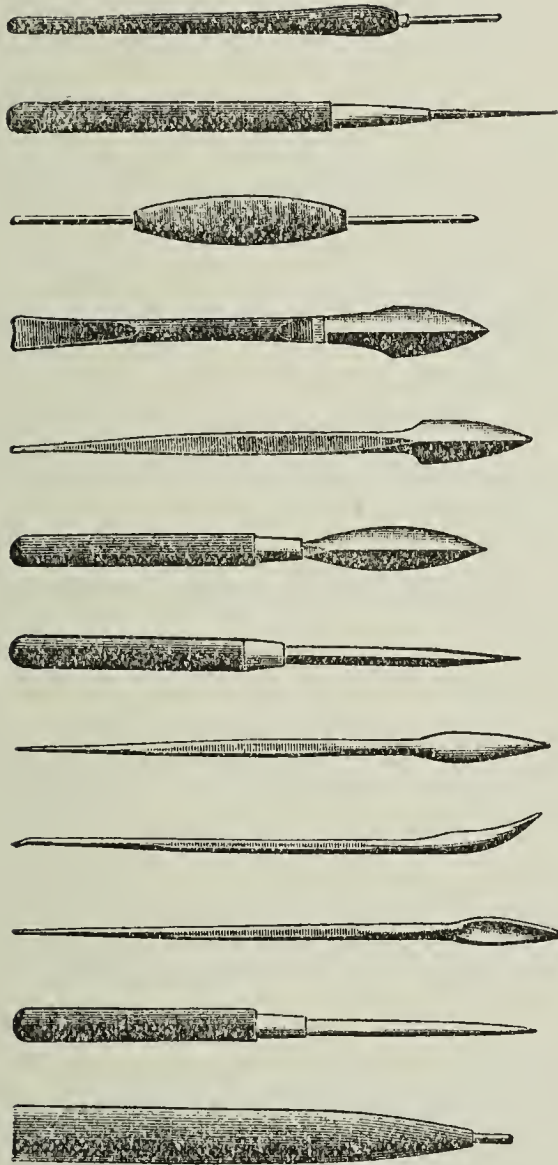


Photo-  
gradure  
(continued)

the light beneath a *reversed* negative. Under the lights or clearer portions of the reversed negative the film is acted upon by the light and rendered insoluble while those portions under the tones and shadows remain unaffected. The film is then transferred to a highly polished copper plate which has been "grounded" with a fine grain of powdered asphalt, dusted evenly over it and fixed by heat. The film is then "developed" by washing in warm water. The soluble gelatine representing the *darks* is washed away, the insoluble representing the *light* remains to act as a varying resistant to the etching mordant to whose action the plate is now exposed. The usual mordant is a solution of perchloride of iron and this penetrates the film with comparative ease in those parts representing the shades where there is little or no gelatine and thus bites into the copper and around each infinitesimal grain of asphalt to a considerable depth. In the parts representing the tonal shades, however, where the gelatine is thicker, the mordant penetrates with more and more difficulty leaving the ground in the highest lights practically untouched.





Sir Thomas Gainsborough      Gainsborough Dupont  
Eldest Princesses

When the biting has, in the judgment of the engraver, proceeded far enough, the gelatine and the asphalt ground are cleaned off and the plate is ready for the printer.

A solution of resin in spirits of wine is poured over the prepared copper plate (prepared the same as for a mezzotint) and drained off at one corner. This mixture when dry will leave a deposit of resin in minute specks (covering the plate evenly when properly done), which adhere to the plate when slightly heated. Acid is then applied; this eats into the spaces around each speck of resin. With a strong magnifying glass one can detect this process by the shape of the dots.

**Aquatint  
Ground**

The copper plate is coated with oil and powdered sulphur is dusted over it; this acts quickly, but the ground is very delicate and needs to be bitten with acid, otherwise only a few impressions can be obtained.

**Sulphur-  
tint**

The plate is covered with a liquid ground, made by mixing wax gum and resin, the same as in etching. When the plate is

**Sandgrain**



**Sandgrain** held face down over a gas jet this ground  
(continued) becomes mixed with the black smoke from the flame, making a jet black surface which, when dry, will resist acid. A piece of sandpaper is then pressed face downwards into it, leaving little holes in the ground. The plate is then immersed in acid which bites wherever the holes are, into the plate.

In printing from the plates prepared as above described the result is not unlike a mezzotint, which is a series of dots. The dots, however, in pure mezzotint always have a burr, while the others do not.

All these processes require acid, while in a pure mezzotint no acid is used.

**Soft  
Ground  
Etching** Soft ground etching or *Gravure dans du crayon*, as the French term it, was very popular in the eighteenth Century. Upon the copper plate is laid an etching ground of a much softer and oilier nature than the ordinary. Over this is laid a sheet of thin paper carefully attached round the edges. On this the drawing is made in soft lead pencil used with a bold firm stroke and even pressure. When the paper is carefully

removed it carries with it the soft ground which adheres to the reverse side only where the pressure of the pencil has been applied. The plate is then bitten in the usual manner and the effect, when printed, closely resembles that of a crayon drawing.

**Soft  
Ground  
Etching  
(continued)**

An etching ground is laid upon the copper plate, then with an etching needle the outline of the drawing is pricked through the wax, with a series of dots; afterwards the shadows are made. The plate is bitten as is an etching. The wax is then removed and the dots are re-entered with a specially shaped engraver, known as a stipple-graver.

**Stipple  
Engraving**

1st. Printing from the Grounded Plate.  
2d. Printing from the Grounded and Etched Outline Plate.  
3d. Printing from the finished plate.  
These are taken to prove the work, and are called trial proofs.

**Progress  
of the  
Plate**

### **Etching Tools.**

Hammer  
Scorper  
Oil Rubber  
Dabber  
Roller  
Needle  
Acid  
Burnisher  
Scraper  
Plate Callipers  
Roulettes

### **Dry Point Tools.**

Needle  
Burnisher  
Scraper

### **Mezzotint Tools.**

Scorper  
Rocker or Cradle  
Scraper  
Burnisher  
Roulettes

### **Stipple Tools**

Stipple Engraver  
Burnisher  
Scraper



The following list comprises some of the prices which fine impressions have brought at auction during the last few years. These serve to show the great admiration and desire to procure the best exponents in this style and period of engravings which prevail in England at the present time.

**Mrs. Carnac**

After Reynolds, by J. R. Smith, before title with publication line and artists' names in scratched letters, \$6,090

**Duchess of Rutland**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before title with publication line and artists' names in scratched letters, \$5,250

**Lady Catherine Pelham Clinton**

After Reynolds, by J. R. Smith, inscription in scratched letters, \$4,945

**Lady Betty Delmé**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before title with publication line and artists' names in scratched letters, \$4,830

**Lady Bampfylde**

After Reynolds, by T. Watson, 1st published state, before name of personage, \$4,620

**The Hon'ble. Miss Monckton**

After Reynolds, by Jacobé, first state, \$4,500

**Mrs. Davenport**

After Romney, by J. Jones, 1st state,  
with untrimmed margins, \$3,255

**Lady Crosbie**

After Reynolds, by W. Dickinson, before the title, with publication line, and artists' names in scratched letters, \$3,045

**The Ladies' Waldegrave**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before names of personages with publication line and artists' names in scratched letters, \$2,940

**Mrs. Michael Angelo Taylor, as Miranda**

After Hoppner, by W. Ward, before inscription, \$2,877 50

**Countess of Salisbury**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before title, with publication line and artists' names in scratched letters, \$2,625

**The Hon'ble. Mrs. Beresford, Mrs. Gardiner and Vicountess Townshend**

After Reynolds, by T. Watson, before inscription, \$2,570

**Lady Jane Halliday**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before title  
with publication line and artists' names  
in scratched letters, \$2,362 50

**Vicountess Townshend**

After Reynolds, by V. Green, before title,  
with publication line, and artists' names  
in scratched letters, \$2,362 50

**Mrs. Carwardine**

After Romney, by J. R. Smith, first  
state, \$2,257 50

**The Hon'ble. Mrs. Stanhope**

After Reynolds, by J. R. Smith, first  
state, \$2,152 50

**Miss Cumberland**

After Romney, by J. R. Smith, first state,  
with inscription in scratched letters, \$2,047 50

**Lady Hamilton, as Nature**

After Romney, by Meyrer, first state, \$2,021 25

**The Douglas Children and The Hoppner  
Children**

After Hoppner, by J. Ward, proof with  
titles in open letters, a pair, \$1,890

**Lady Heathcote, as Hebe**

After Hoppner, by I. Ward, 1st state,  
inscription in open letters, \$1,310

**Lady Hamilton, as Bacchante**

After Reynolds, by J. R. Smith, first  
state, inscription in open letters, \$1,625

**Duchess of Buccleuch and Daughter**

After Reynolds, by T. Watson, first  
state, \$1,575

**Mrs. Payne Galwey and Son**

After Reynolds, by J. R. Smith, first  
state, inscription in scratched letters, \$1,522 50

**The Hon'ble. Mrs. North**

After Romney, by J. R. Smith, before  
inscription, \$1,312 50









PUT IN TYPES AND PRINTED  
AT THE GOERCK ART PRESS  
SIXTH AVE. AT FIFTY-THIRD  
STREET, NEW YORK - .

88-B32306





